

# Garden Project receives NRCS Volunteer Award

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SOME OF THE 50-PLUS VOLUNTEERS AND PARTNERS WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE MARIPOSA COUNTY RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT'S NATIVE PLANT DEMONSTRATION GARDEN PROJECT VISITED THE PROJECT SITE TUESDAY TO BE RECOGNIZED BY THE NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE AS CALIFORNIA'S NRCS EARTH TEAM OF THE YEAR FOR 2010. PICTURED IN FRONT, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, ARE DONOVAN PETERSON, DONNA WICE, KATHY WALLIS, PAT GARCIA, KRIS RANDAL, MARY LINN, KRIS CASTO, MARION LAFLER, DEE DEE COMBES, JULIE DOWSING, JANETTE GAMBLE, MANDY VANCE, GLENN FRANKLIN AND DAWN AFMAN. STANDING BEHIND ARE JIM SPOTTS, JEFF GABE, LEN MCKENZIE, MAXWELL NORTON, LONNIE ALLEN, CURTIS TARVER, NRCS ASSISTANT STATE CONSERVATIONIST, AND MARK HOLCOMBE.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has honored a Mariposa County Resource Conservation District (MCRCD) project with its 2010 Earth Team Volunteers of the Year award for the State of California. The award was presented at a statewide NRCS meeting held last month in Sacramento, and NRCS officials came to Mariposa this week to visit the project site.

The MCRCD's Earth Team of dedicated volunteers, working under the direction of MCRCD project manager Kris Randal, has transformed a 2,000- square-foot eroded, weed-infested site at the Mariposa County Fairgrounds into a Sierra Nevada Foothills Native Plant Demonstration Garden. The project, conceived and planned by Randal, is now about 80 percent complete. The site will be wheelchair-accessible to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act when the garden pathway is surfaced within the next several weeks.

Funded by a 2008 grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, the garden showcases, in a public, home-like setting, a diversity of indigenous trees, shrubs, groundcovers and wildflowers that exemplify adaptations for drought tolerance and water conservation, require little if any irrigation, stabilize soil and control erosion, protect water quality, repel invasive weeds, offer important habitat values for wildlife and attract native pollinators. Interpretive signs and a pamphlet, yet to be completed, will interpret these qualities, highlight California Indians' cultural uses of these plants and promote fire-safe landscaping.

NRCS officials Curtis Tarver, assistant state conservationist for field operations; Pamela Hertzler, the California state Earth Team coordinator and a soil conservationist in the NRCS's Merced office; and Jonathan Groveman, a public affairs specialist in the NRCS's state office in Davis, visited the garden Tuesday to see the site first-hand and to meet some of the volunteers.

Randal emphasized that the volunteers' contributions have been pivotal in accomplishing the design and physical work to convert this eyesore into an educational attraction that will benefit area residents and visitors alike. "This project could not have been achieved without their persevering commitment and sustained support," she said. "The NRCS's recognition of this achievement is deeply gratifying, and I can't thank the volunteers enough for their support." She added, "And I can't pass up the opportunity to say thanks again to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, which enabled this project in the first place."

Volunteers' contributions have included site planning and design; site preparation, including endless weeding and additions of soil and mulches; identification and selection of plants; configuration of planting areas; installation of the irrigation system; storm damage repairs and installation of drainage devices; pathway excavation, grading and edging to comply with ADA standards; and placement of about 250 plants in the ground, enveloped in hand-cut wire gopher baskets, followed by intermittent hand watering over a period of eight months.

Saying she doesn't want to underplay the important role all of the volunteers have played in the project to date, Randal specifically cited the many hours of physical work, expertise and quality control donated by volunteers Jim Spotts, Don Fox, Gary Friesen, Jeff Gabe, Janette Gamble, Peggy Moore, Dee-Dee Combes, Glenn Franklin and Len McKenzie.

Randal also acknowledged the ongoing commitment of Kathy Wallis of the Mariposa County Probation Department and the participation of the department's community-service enrollees. "Kathy's and her crews' involvement in this project have been invaluable," Randal said. Led by Wallis, the department has made more than 20 trips to the garden, bringing an average of four people per trip. "Not only have the participants earned community-service credits," Randal said, "putting in many hours of physical labor, mostly weeding, but the experience has educated them on the values of native plants and the value of the project to the community. Several participants have continued to volunteer at the garden after fulfilling their community-service obligation."

Additional specialized skills and equipment have included the delivery and placement by crane of eight large boulders by the crane's owner/operator, Bob Evans, who volunteered his time and equipment. Stonemason Pat Conlisk constructed two native rock retaining walls with rocks he collected locally; Larry Ends and Cindy Brooks of Ahwahnee crafted a third rock retaining wall using rocks they collected onsite; and Donovan Peterson and Kevin Bowman of the Chrysalis Institute fabricated a "papercrete" retaining wall around a fourth planting mound.

Using their own equipment, Mark Holcombe and Lonnie Allen delivered two trailer loads of wood chips, donated by landowners Al and Carliene Anderson, to be used as mulch.

Retired educator Gamble, Randal noted, has been especially helpful in developing curriculum-based lesson plans and onsite activities targeted for fourth-grade students. Gamble and Randal

used the lesson plans in visits to the Woodland School fourth-grade classes in preparation for a field trip to the garden by 47 fourthgraders last spring. Five docents along with Gamble and retired Mariposa County Farm Advisor Karen Robb provided the instruction on native plants, the plants' values and important plant pollinators during the site visit. The students created identifier cards that were later placed in the garden as interim interpretive signs.

McKenzie will complete the permanent interpretive signs and a complementary pamphlet within the next several months, Randal added.

Randal also noted that the demonstration garden shares the site outside the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's office at the fairgrounds with the Upper Merced River Watershed Council's Landscape Conservation Project, funded under a separate grant from the Sierra Nevada Alliance. Exhibiting water-conservation amenities and practices that property owners can adopt at home, the landscaping project is complementary to the garden project and their themes are mutually reinforcing.

Randal went on to say this project has been, and will continue to be for many years, highly useful in educating both a growing population of foothill residents and area visitors. This heightened public awareness and the application of these precepts to home yards and gardens will enhance property values, reduce homeowner maintenance costs and help Mariposa County realize its long-term resource conservation goals. The project has also mitigated a long-standing stormwater runoff problem for the Mariposa County Fairgrounds and transformed an ugly site into an attraction that will boost tourism and the local economy.